# Late Paganism as Witnessed by the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*

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THE SIXTH CENTURY CE is commonly seen as the final twilight of Greco-Roman religion. With the emperor Justinian prohibiting the performance of pagan rites even in private, the religious tradition of ancient Greece and Rome practically had come to an end.[1] The closing of the Neoplatonic Academy at Athens in 529 and subsequent flight of its last scholarch Damascius to Persia effectively destroyed if not the theoretical basis of paganism then at least an important part of its educational infrastructure.[2] At the same time the demolition of temples or their rededication as churches had become endemic in all parts of the empire. In spite of this, the Syriac *Book of the Cave of Treasures* (henceforth *CT*), a Christian apocryphal work of the late sixth or early seventh century written on Persian ground, bears witness to an apparently still vibrant practice of

[1] Cf. K. W. Harl, "Sacrifice and Pagan Belief in Fifth- and Sixth-century Byzantium," *PastPres* 128 (1990) 7–27, here 22–26. Whereas public displays of pagan beliefs had been banned from the early fifth century onward, Justinian's measures "made it against the law even to be a pagan" (Alan Cameron, "Paganism in Sixth-century Byzantium," in *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy* [Oxford 2016] 255–286, here 255). On the anti-pagan legislation of Theodosius II in the first half of the fifth century see J. Hahn, "Gesetze als Waffe? Die kaiserliche Religionspolitik und die Zerstörung der Tempel," in *Spätantiker Staat und religiöser Konflikt* (Berlin 2011) 201–220.

[2] On Alexandrian Neoplatonism's adaptation to Christianity and its increasingly antiquarian interest in the Hellenic past see C. Wildberg, "Three Neoplatonic Introductions to Philosophy: Ammonius, David and Elias," *Hermathena* 149 (1990) 33–51, esp. 33–34, 38, 44–45; H. Tarrant, "Olympiodorus and the Surrender of Paganism," *ByzF* 24 (1997) 181–192, esp. 182, 185, 191–192.

*Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 59 (2019) 507–528

Hellenised oriental cults alongside the indigenous Zoroastrian religion in the border area between Byzantium and the Sasanid empire. As *CT* has so far not been used as a source-text in the reconstruction of late antique paganism, it seems *prima facie* worthwhile to collect and analyse whatever can be gleaned from the text in terms of contemporary pagan practices.

The *Cave of Treasures*, which in some manuscripts is attributed to the Syrian theologian Ephrem of Nisibis (fourth century), in all likelihood was written towards the beginning of the seventh century during the final years of the Sasanian monarchy but before the rise of Islam. This can be inferred with reasonable certainty from the use of Sasanian royal names for the magi attending Jesus' birth (*CT* 45.19)—among them "Parwezdad," which seems to refer to Khosrau II Aparvez (590–628)—and from the fact that *CT* is first quoted in the *Revelations of Ps.-Methodius* in the mid-seventh century and shows no trace of knowledge of the Muslim conquest. In combination this makes a rather strong case for the work being written sometime during or shortly after the reign of Khosrau II, most likely on Persian soil, by an author belonging to the ("Nestorian") Church of the East. The book was written in Syriac, the language used by Persian Christians for ecclesiastical and scholarly purposes, and has been translated into Arabic, Ethiopic, Georgian and possibly Coptic, as well.[3]

As to its content, *CT* essentially presents a re-reading of Old Testament history with a focus on pre-diluvian times and an

[3] Cf. my "The Cave of Treasures. A New Translation and Introduction," in R. Bauckham et al. (eds.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha. More Noncanonical Scriptures* I (Grand Rapids 2013) 531–584, here 532–535. On the *CT*'s Syriac background cf. S. Minov, "The *Cave of Treasures* and the Formation of Syriac Christian Identity in Late Antique Mesopotamia," in B. Bitton-Ashkelony et al. (eds.), *Between Personal and Institutional Religion* (Turnhout 2013) 155–194. The Syriac text is preserved in two recensions which reflect the confessional split of Syrian Christians into a western ("Jacobite" monophysite) and an eastern ("Nestorian" dyophysite) branch. The differences between the recensions are mostly doctrinal in nature and do not affect the passages translated below.

emphasis on genealogical tables leading in an uninterrupted path from Adam to Jesus. Its author makes use of a variety of sources of mostly Christian provenance which are strung together in the well-known scheme of *septimana mundi*, i.e an attempt to structure history according to a framework of seven times 1000 years.[4] The coherent use of chronology and the fact that so far no independent source-texts outside of *CT* have been identified strongly suggest that the text in its entirety goes back to the seventh-century author instead of being an assemblage of earlier unrelated works.[5] Whatever its sources may have been, the book had a long afterlife in both Christian and Muslim authors, mostly historians and polymaths such as Ps.-Dionysius of Tell-Mahre (late eighth century), al-Jaqubi (late ninth century), Tabari and Eutychius of Alexandria (both ninth/tenth century), Michael the Syrian (late twelfth century), Barhebraeus and Solomon of Basra (both thirteenth century).[6]

The work has been studied in its literary and theological aspects rather than as a source-text for contemporary religious practices. Its author, however, was witness not only to the Zoroastrian religion of Sasanid Persia but also to Greco-Roman religious practices in the eastern Mediterranean and northern Mesopotamia. In the following I present the descriptions of Greco-Roman and Persian cults together with the references to the related phenomenon of astrology as they are found in the Syriac text. My aim is to shed light on late paganism in the

[4] On the *septimana mundi* see W. Witakowski, "The Idea of *Septimana Mundi* and the Millenarian Typology of the Creation Week in Syriac Tradition," in R. Lavenant (ed.), *V Symposium Syriacum 1988* (Rome 1990) 93–109.

[5] Cf. C. Leonhard, "Observations on the Date of the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*," in P. M. M. Daviau et al. (eds.), *The World of the Aramaeans* III: *Studies in Language and Literature in Honour of Paul-Eugène Dion* (Sheffield 2001) 255–293. Source-critical hypotheses have been brought forward by A. Goetze, *Die Schatzhöhle. Überlieferung und Quellen* (Heidelberg 1922), and by Su-Min Ri (the editor of the Syriac text of *CT* ), "La Caverne des Trésors. Problèmes d'analyse littéraire," in *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984* (Rome 1987) 183–190.

[6] For a detailed investigation into the influence of *CT* see A. Goetze, "Die Nachwirkung der Schatzhöhle," *ZS* 2 (1923) 51–94 and 3 (1924) 53–71, 153–177.

eastern part of Byzantium and adjacent areas as well as to investigate the way in which it was perceived by an author who both geographically and ideologically writes as an outsider to Greco-Roman culture. As the investigation will make clear, *CT* probably is more deeply steeped in the Hellenic tradition than has hitherto been realized.

*Euhemeristic explanation of pagan cults*

References to pagan cults are sparse in the *Cave of Treasures*. After all, the text, being part of the rewritten-bible genre, first and foremost is concerned with retelling biblical history *ab initio mundi* until Pentecost, while giving the account some characteristic twists, the background and motives of which cannot always be fully understood. As is common among Christian authors of late antiquity, the origin of pagan cults is explained by *CT* in a euhemeristic way. In the course of its *relecture* of biblical history, the 'invention' of image-worship is narrated in the context of the prehistory of Abraham (25.13–14):

> When someone of them died they made for him an image in his likeness and put it upon his grave so that his memory would not pass away from their eyes. When error had been sown upon the whole earth it became full of all kinds of idols in the likeness of men and women.

Shortly thereafter the author elaborates on this point (26.1–10):

> In the days of Terah [Abraham's father according to Gen 11:26], in his ninetieth year, sorcery appeared in the land of Ur, in the city which Harran, son of Eber, had built. There was in it a man who was very rich and had died at that time. His son made himself an image of gold, put it upon his grave and made a servant stay there in order to guard it. Then Satan went and dwelt within this image. And Satan spoke with the boy in the likeness of his father. Then thieves came and took everything the young man had collected, so that he went out to his father's grave weeping. Satan spoke with him and told him: "Do not cry in front of me but go, bring your little son and sacrifice him for me. Then everything which has been lost will immediately be returned to you." At once he did as Satan had told him, sacrificed his son and bathed in his blood. Immediately Satan came out from that image, entered into the young man, and taught him magic, incantations, divination,

> Chaldaean arts, fortune-telling, augury, and omens. Behold, from then on humankind began to sacrifice their children to the demons and to worship idols, for the devils entered into them and dwelt within all the images.

The latter passage is interesting in several respects. Whereas the euhemeristic theme is common in several earlier Christian authors (e.g. Ps.-Clem. Rom. *Hom.* 5.23; Clem. Alex. *Protr.* 2.24.2; Min. Fel. 21.1–5; Lact. *Div.Inst.* 1.1; Arnob. 4.29), *CT* here connects the origin of image-worship with the idea that images are inhabited by oracle-giving demons, thereby tying traditional pagan religion intimately to "magic, incantations, divination, Chaldaean arts, fortune-telling, augury, and omens."

Both themes—the idea that statues are vehicles of divine presence and the link between traditional religion and theurgy—are of course well known from Neoplatonism and at least the idea that statues were inhibited by demons seems to have been current in Byzantium as late as the ninth century.[7] The author of *CT* sees these demons as evil spirits; "conversely, in the eyes of fourth-century Neoplatonists, idols were animated with divine presence."[8] Thus, while for Plotinus (*Enn.* 4.3.11) statues simply mediate the presence of the gods, they can predict the future according to Proclus (*In Ti.*, III 155.18–22 Diehl).[9] Closer to the

[7] C. Mango, "Antique Statuary and the Byzantine Beholder," *DOP* 17 (1963) 53–75, here 56–59; H. Saradi-Mendelovici, "Christian Attitudes toward Pagan Monuments in Late Antiquity and their Legacy in Late Byzantine Centuries," *DOP* 44 (1990) 47–61, here 56–58; I. Jacobs, "Production to Destruction? Pagan and Mythological Statuary in Asia Minor," *AJA* 114 (2010) 267–303, here 267–273, 279–282 (crosses carved on the foreheads of statues as a form of Christianization or exorcism), 285–286 (burial of statues as a means "to neutralize their powers"), 291–292 ("systematic statuary destruction from the seventh century onward"). For an account of the belief in animated statues from archaic through imperial times see J. N. Bremmer, "The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues," *Opuscula* 6 (2013) 7–21, here 7–14. Among Christian authors already Eusebius *Dem.Evang.* 6.20.11 regards cult statues as being inhabited by demons.

[8] Mango, *DOP* 17 (1963) 56 n.7.

[9] On animated statues see generally E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*

time of *CT*, the Neoplatonist Damascius reports about an oracle-giving baetyl, a stylized or aniconic representation of originally Semitic gods or goddesses, which he encountered during a stay at Emesa in the late fifth century:[10]

> I saw the baetyl moving in the air, now hiding itself in the clothes of its guardian, now held in his hands.

The guardian, whose name was Eusebius, had found the baetyl on the top of a nearby mountain, where he had felt compelled to go in the middle of the night:

> He then suddenly saw a ball of fire leaping down from above and a huge lion standing beside it, which instantly vanished. He ran up to the ball as the fire was dying down and understood that this was indeed the baetyl; picking it up, he asked it which god possessed it, and the baetyl answered that it belonged to Gennaios (the Heliopolitans honour Gennaios in the temple of Zeus in the shape of a lion).

Damascius then gives a description of the baetyl's outward appearance and oracular properties:

> The stone was a perfect sphere, whitish in colour and a span in diameter; its size was sometimes larger, sometimes smaller, and on occasion it acquired a purple hue. He [the guardian] pointed out to us letters inscribed on the stone and coloured with the so-

(Berkeley 1951) 292–295; P. Boyancé, "Théurgie et télestique néoplatoniciennes," *RHR* 147 (1955) 189–209, here 194–195 with nn.3–4; D. Felton, "The Animated Statues of Lucian's *Philopseudes*," *CB* 77 (2001) 75–86, esp. 77; S. I. Johnston, "Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual," *Arethusa* 41 (2008) 445–477; Bremmer, *Opuscula* 6 (2013) 14–16; I. Männlein-Robert, "Zeichen deuten – Zeichen setzen," in *Die Christen als Bedrohung? Text, Kontext und Wirkung von Porphyrios' Contra Christianos* (Stuttgart 2017) 177–206.

[10] This and the following translations are taken from P. Athanassiadi, *Damascius. The Philosophical History* (Athens 1999) 309 (Greek text at 308). See also J. Aliquot, "Au pays des bétyles: l'excursion du philosophe Damascius à Émèse et à Héliopolis du Liban," *CCG* 21 (2010) 305–328. The incident described here must have taken place during Damascius' visit to Emesa and Heliopolis around 489–490 (Athanassiadi 305). Baetyls apparently were connected with oracles, cf. Athanassiadi 318–319 (with references to *Hypomnesticon* 144.50 [*PG* 106.161] and to Roman coins from the third century on).

> called vermillion, through which it rendered oracles to the enquirer.

This is of course far removed from the account in *CT*, but there are nevertheless some basic elements shared by both texts, especially the concept that statues or cult-objects are made alive by the presence of gods or demons within them and their consequent ability to give oracles to those inquiring of them.

The theme of human sacrifice which is introduced by *CT* in this context is attributed to Julian in the *Historia Ecclesiastica* of Theodoret (3.26.2–3). Writing in the first half of the fifth century, the church historian recounts a visit of Julian to the northern Mesopotamian city of Harran during his campaign against the Persians. While the visit and a sacrifice in the temple of the moon god Sin are historical (Amm. Marc. 23.3.2), Theodoret has him sacrifice a woman for oracular purposes. Even though this story is most likely a fabrication of Julian's Christian adversaries, there seem to have been human sacrifices down to the sixth century in connection with the Arab goddess al-ʿUzza.[11]

As punishment for the rampant idolatry in Abraham's time, the author of *CT* then introduces a "deluge of wind," which is based upon a similar account of Josephus (*AJ* 1.118).[12] Whereas Josephus has the tower of Babel destroyed by this cataclysmic event, *CT* employs it to wipe out idol worship. The account thus closes with a reference to archaeology (26.11, 17–18):

> God opened the storehouses of storms, so that great winds went forth upon the whole earth, destroyed the images and temples of the demons, drove away those idols, images and pacts, and made great mounds around them (which are there) to the present day

[11] Cf. T. Green, "The Presence of the Goddess in Harran," in E. N. Lane (ed.), *Cybele, Attis, and Related Cults* (Leiden 1996) 87–100, here 97; Th. Hainthaler, "Die Töchter Allahs in vorislamischer Zeit mit besonderer Berücksichtigung von al-ʿUzzā," in G. Augustin et al. (eds.), *Christentum im Dialog* (Freiburg i.Br. 2014) 297–310, here 306–308. These incidents occurred in the fifth and sixth centuries, that is, in the recent past from the perspective of the author of *CT*.

[12] Cf. S.-M. Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors* (Louvain 2000) 316.

> … Those mounds are there because of the idols, and all the idols from that time are hidden within them. Likewise those devils which are said to have been within them are in those (mounds) and there is not a single mound in which there are not devils.

*Harran*

That the statues of old were not just buried beneath the tells of Syria and Mesopotamia, but that paganism was still very much alive at the author's own time, is shown by two later accounts of Harran and Baalbek-Heliopolis, both strongholds of traditional worship towards the end of the sixth century.[13] Especially Harran, located at the crossing of two trade routes connecting Antioch with Nineveh and Melitene with Babylon respectively, gained notoriety well into Islamic times for being home to the Hermetic religion of the Sabians.[14] Christian authors from the fourth century on were highly suspicious of it, and the acts of the Council of Chalcedon in fact mention Harran as Ἑλλήνων πόλις (*ACO* II.3 25.3). In the reign of the emperor Maurice (582–602) there was a persecution which led to the martyrdom of the prefect Acindynus for failing to convince the authorities of the sincerity of his conversion to Christianity.[15]

[13] Cf. Harl, *PastPres* 128 (1990) 14; E. Watts, "Where to Live the Philosophical Life in the Sixth Century? Damascius, Simplicius, and the Return from Persia," *GRBS* 45 (2005) 285–315, here 302–305. There even seem to have been revolts in both cities in reaction to the anti-pagan policies of emperors Tiberius II (578–582) and Maurice (582–602); cf. Harl 26 with n.67.

[14] See generally W. Cramer, "Harran," *RAC* 13 (1986) 634–650; M. Tardieu, "Ṣābiens coraniques et 'Ṣābiens' de Ḥarrān," *JA* 274 (1986) 1–44; J. van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra* (Berlin 1992) 442–460; U. Possekel, "The Transformation of Harran from a Pagan Cult Center to a Christian Pilgrimage Site," *POr* 36 (2011) 345–356. From the ninth century on Harranians referred to themselves as "Sabians," who are mentioned in the Quran (2.62, 5.69, 22.17) as "people of the book" and thus were tolerated in an Islamic environment. As their prophet they chose Hermes Trismegistus who was identified with Idris-Henoch and may have been of importance in Harran even before the name-change; cf. van Ess 447–448 with n.33.

[15] Cf. Cramer, *RAC* 13 (1986) 646–647; D. Pingree, "The Ṣābians of Ḥarrān and the Classical Tradition," *IJCT* 9 (2002) 8–35, here 17. The event

Despite a shared hostility towards Harran, the author of *CT* still has an interesting piece of religious history in connection with the ongoing account of the time of Abraham (30.19–21):

> Nimrod went up and built Nisibis, Edessa and Harran. Harranit, the wife of Sin, priest of the mountain, surrounded it with ramparts. Then the Harranians made an image of her and worshipped it. Baltin was given to Tammuz, but because Baal-Shamin loved her, Tammuz flew from her, and she kindled a fire in order to burn Harran.

In the briefest possible manner the author here gives an overview of the Harranian cult and mythology as it presumably was at the end of the sixth century. To begin with, under its euhemeristic guise emerge the ancient moon god Sin and his wife Nikkal/Ningal, here called *Harranit*, a compositum of the *nomen locis* with the Semitic feminine ending *-it*. Worship of her husband Sin is documented at least from the fourteenth century BCE and seems to have ceased only with the final destruction of his temple by fire in 1035 CE.[16] As mentioned above, Julian visited the temple in 363 to obtain an oracle. Sin's consort Ningal, on the other hand, "is the most clearly formulated female aspect of the moon,"[17] and indeed there is a certain amount of confusion in Greek and Latin authors as to whether Harran's main deity should be seen as male or female. Thus Herodian (4.13) and Ammianus Marcellinus (23.3.2) refer to *Selene* and *Luna*, respectively, while the *HA* (*Caracalla* 7.3) mentions *Lunus* as a secret name alongside the commonly-used feminine version *Luna*.

The epithet *Baltin* ("our lady" in Aramaic) most likely refers to their daughter Bat-Nikkal ("daughter of Nikkal"), under which

is reported in the Syriac *Chronicum ad annum 1234*, ch. 79 (I.-B. Chabot, *Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens* [Louvain 1953] 214.24–215.5). Acindynus in fact fell victim to a denunciation to the bishop of Harran, but his death has to be seen in the context of a larger move against paganism in Harran.

[16] Cf. Cramer, *RAC* 13 (1986) 636, 642; T. Green, *The City of the Moon God* (Leiden 1992) 62–64.

[17] Green, in *Cybele* 89.

name she is mentioned in the earlier Christian *Doctrina Addai* as the third main deity of Harran alongside Sin and Nikkal.[18] Later Arabic authors (Ibn al-Nadim in the tenth century, al-Biruni in the eleventh) in fact connect her with the planet Venus.[19] Since this seems to be an ancient tradition, Bat-Nikkal easily could have been identified with the Arab divinity al-ʿUzza ("the strong one" in Arabic) as well as the ubiquitous Syrian goddess Atargatis/Astarte.[20] While al-ʿUzza likewise bore the Aramaic epithets *balti* ("my lady") and *kawkabta* ("star," with feminine ending) and as such probably is mentioned by the *Doctrina Addai* as "Bright Star" (which might refer to Bat-Nikkal, as well),[21] an identification of Bat-Nikkal with Astarte would open up the mythology of Adonis-Tammuz, as indeed is the case in the account of *CT*. Islamic sources (Ibn al-Nadim, Al-Biruni) know of a Tammuz-cult in Harran, whereas the fifth-century Syriac author Jacob of Serug names the Western Semitic storm god Baal-Shamin ("Lord of Heaven") among the deities of Harran.[22]

The love-triangle between Bat-Nikkal, Tammuz, and Baal-Shamin described in *CT* seems to be a rudimentary version of the well-known myth of Adonis, albeit with Baal-Shamin in the role of Ares who according to Firmicus Maternus und Servius killed Adonis-Tammuz, in the shape of a wild boar.[23] This

[18] Cramer, *RAC* 13 (1986) 642–643; Green, *City* 59.

[19] Green, in *Cybele* 99, 94 quoting H. J. W. Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa* (Leiden 1980) 143 ("The *Doctrina Addai* mentions the worship of Bath Nikkal = daughter of Nikkal, certainly a designation of Ishtar-Venus").

[20] On al-ʿUzza see Hainthaler, in *Christentum* 301–310. Archaeological evidence suggests that al-ʿUzza was identified with Aphrodite as well as Isis: M. Lindner, "Eine *al-ʿUzz*-Isis-Stele und andere neu aufgefundene Zeugnisse der *al-ʿUzz*-Verehrung in Petra," *ZDPV* 104 (1988) 84–91, here 84, 89. On the other hand, "Bath-Nikkal and Atargatis … have much in common" (Drijvers, *Cults* 42).

[21] Cf. Green, in *Cybele* 96.

[22] Cf. Green, *City* 57–58, 157–158, and in *Cybele* 99.

[23] Firm. Mat. *Err.prof.rel.* 9, Servius auctus on Verg. *Ecl.* 10.18. Cf. H. Niehr, *Religionen in Israels Umwelt* (Würzburg 1998) 121–122; R. Merkelbach, *Isis Regina – Zeus Sarapis*[2] (Munich/Leipzig 2001) 43–48.

replacement may have been instigated in *CT* by the connection between Baal-Shamin and Astarte in Tyre.[24] Bat-Nikkal's fit of rage in reaction to Tammuz' flight from her finds its parallel in a description of Aphrodite/Astarte's despair upon learning of Tammuz' death as found in Bion of Smyrna, which again resembles the destructive gloom of Demeter upon being bereft of Persephone.[25] *CT*'s description of the cult of Harran, sparse and truncated as it is, thus seems to hint at a pattern of the dying god as it is well known from the Adonis cult as well as the mythologies of Isis and Osiris and the Eleusinian mysteries, all of which were popular well into late antiquity.

*Baalbek-Heliopolis*

The Syrian city Baalbek/Heliopolis, which was one of the last remaining centres of paganism alongside Harran in the outgoing sixth century, is likewise mentioned in the *Cave of Treasures*. Its foundation is attributed to Solomon (35.18–21):

> When Solomon passed by the foothills of the mountain which is called Seïr he found an altar there which Piorzani, Pirozaki and Nasnador had built, those whom the hero Nimrod had sent to Bileam, priest of the mountain of Seïr, because he had heard, that (Bileam) was using horoscopes. When they passed by the foothills of Seïr they built an altar there to the sun. When Solomon saw it he built a city there and named it "Heliopolis," that is, "City of the Sun."

This short passage is remarkable in several respects. In addition to the connection with Solomon, which appears in several Syriac Christian chronicles and may have been a local tradition of Baalbek's Christian minority,[26] the origin of Heliopolis is again

[24] Cf. Green, *City* 61, 67–70.

[25] Cf. Merkelbach, *Isis* 46–47, 52. Demeter is said in *Hom.Hymn.Dem.* 47–50 to have roamed the earth carrying burning torches, but a connection to Bat-Nikkal setting Harran on fire in *CT* 30.21 seems far-fetched.

[26] See on this S. Minov, "The Story of Solomon's Palace at Heliopolis," *Le Muséon* 123 (2010) 61–89, esp. 76–78. The Christian legend seems to have originated no earlier than the sixth century but became the common explanation for Baalbek's monumental architecture well into Islamic times. An

connected with Nimrod, as was that of Harran. Nimrod's astrological background (see below) can be clearly seen here. While the names of Nimrod's envoys remain unintelligible, they are presented as the founders of a solar cult at Baalbek.[27] Such a cult was not only implied by the city's Hellenistic name "Heliopolis," but is also attested in Macrobius' description of Baalbek (*Sat.* 1.23.10–21). There Baalbek's main deity Jupiter Heliopolitanus is expressly identified with the sun god whose statue is made of the solar metal, gold. While this does not correspond to the god's true historical pedigree (Jupiter Heliopolitanus seems to have been derived from the Syro-Palestinian storm god Baal-Hadad), it is quite in line with the general tendency of late antiquity to reduce male divinities to the sun god.[28]

Although not mentioned by the Syriac author, the actual cult

alternative foundation story is found in a Christian Sibylline oracle which likewise originated from Baalbek, but attributes its foundation to "Antiochus" (without further specification), Tiberius, and Caligula: Minov 76–77; Y. Hajjar, "Baalbek grande centre religieux sous l'Empire," *ANRW* II 18.4 (1990) 2458–2508, here 2461 with n.9 quoting from P. J. Alexander, *The Oracle of Baalbek* (Washington 1967) 13.

[27] Minov (*Le Muséon* 123 [2010] 71) suggests that a textual variant of *CT* 35.20, which speaks of *three* altars erected by the envoys of Nimrod, refers to the famous *trilithon* at the base of the Jupiter temple at Heliopolis. While this is an attractive possibility, it does not fit well either with the manuscript tradition or with the actual situation at Baalbek's main temple. The reading in question is found in only some of the Syriac manuscripts, but is missing in the important witness *Brit.Mus.Add.* 25875 and seems to have been generated by a wish to make the number of altars correspond to the number of envoys. The *trilithon* at Baalbek itself is part of a larger structure and, being closely joined together in the temple's foundation, is unlikely to have been mistaken for three distinct altars.

[28] Cf. W. Liebeschuetz, "The Significance of the Speech of Praetextatus," in P. Athanassiadi et al. (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford 1999) 185–205, here 186–194 with n.46 (on Jupiter Heliopolitanus), 203; F. Cumont, *La théologie solaire du paganisme romain* (Paris 1909) (on the intellectual background of sun-worship, for which Cumont posits an "oriental" origin amplified by astrological and Stoic speculations). Much of the pertinent material has been collected and analysed by W. Fauth, *Helios Megistos* (Leiden 1995).

at Heliopolis was dedicated to a triad, Jupiter, Venus, and Mercury.[29] While there is no way to establish with certainty which of the Semitic divinities are referred to by this *interpretatio romana*, it seems fairly certain to identify Jupiter with Baal-Hadad and Venus with his consort Atargatis.[30] The identification of "Mercury" is less clear; one possibility is to relate him to Adonis-Eshmun and/or Dionysus/Bacchus, but his iconography also shows solar traits.[31] Apart from a possible link to Harran through the presence of Adonis, Baalbek certainly had a reputation for its oracle as well.[32] The temple of Jupiter at Baalbek might furthermore contain a direct astrological aspect insofar as its hexagonal atrium could have served a planetary cult.[33] This, again, relates well to the account of *CT*, according to which the cult at Baalbek had been founded by men seeking wisdom from Bileam, the biblical archetype of an astrologer and magician.[34]

*Zoroastrianism*

It is Nimrod, however, who in the *Cave of Treasures* is not only presented as king and founder of cities but also as the father of Zoroastrianism and an aspirant to astronomical and astrological knowledge. Identified with Zoroaster by Christian authors early

[29] Cf. Hajjar, *ANRW* II18.4 (1990) 2462–2465.

[30] The description of her statue at Macrob. *Sat.* 1.21.5 shows resemblances to the iconography of Astarte as well as Demeter, Cybele, and Isis. According to the same author (1.23.19–20) Venus Heliopolitana, like Atargatis, was a goddess of the earth and fertility; cf. Hajjar, *ANRW* II 18.4 (1990) 2485–2487 with n.216. More recently, Andreas Kropp has argued against too facile an interpretation of the Baalbek triad: "Jupiter, Venus and Mercury of Heliopolis (Baalbek)," *Syria* 87 (2010) 229–264.

[31] Cf. Hajjar, *ANRW* II 18.4 (1990) 2465–2467, 2489.

[32] Cf. Aliquot, *CCG* 21 (2010) 323–324.

[33] Hajjar, *ANRW* II 18.4 (1990) 2491. Islamic authors report similar geometrically-shaped temples in Harran: van Ess, *Theologie* 443, 448; Pingree, *IJCT* 9 (2002) 26–27.

[34] Cf. Ri, *Commentaire* 393–394, citing J.Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellenisés* (Paris 1973 [1938]) I 46–49.

on,[35] he is introduced in *CT* as the "first king upon earth" and ruler of Babylon (24.24–26):

> In Reu's days, in his 130th year, the hero Nimrod reigned as first king upon the earth. He ruled for sixty-nine years and the capital of his kingdom was Babylon. Once he saw something like a crown in the sky and then called the weaver Sisan who wove a similar one for him and put it upon his head. Because of this it is said that this crown came down from heaven.

Again, Nimrod-Zoroaster is firmly embedded in biblical history by the reference to "Reu's days" in Gen 11:20 as well as by the epithet "hero" which reflects the Hebrew *gibbor* "warrior" of Gen 10:8. At the same time the author of *CT* here establishes a first link between Nimrod and Zoroastrianism by introducing the "weaver Sisan," whose name sounds conspicuously similar to "Sasan," name-giver of the Sasanid dynasty of late antique Iran. The heavenly crown which Sisan—perhaps not unintentionally in the role of servant—prepares for Nimrod makes an appearance in the Syriac *Romance of Julian*. There it is treated by Julian's opponent Shapur as a token of the Persian kings' oracular powers, which have been bestowed upon Nimrod on the occasion of receiving "the crown from heaven."[36] It is of course tempting to connect this crown with the solar imagery often used in connection with Iranian kings,[37] but the text of *CT* does not give an indication that Nimrod's crown might in fact be an imitation of the sun. The phrase "once he saw something like a

[35] See W. Bousset, *Hauptprobleme der Gnosis* (Göttingen 1907) 147; A. M. Schilling, *Die Anbetung der Magier und die Taufe der Sasaniden* (Louvain 2008) 150–152.

[36] Cf. S. Minov, *Syriac Christian Identity in Late Sasanian Mesopotamia* (diss. Hebrew Univ. Jerusalem 2013) 267–268, with a fuller exploration of the motif's Iranian background at 268–273. On the anti-pagan background of the *Romance of Julian* see J. W. Drijvers, "Julian the Apostate and the City of Rome: Pagan-Christian Polemics in the Syriac *Julian Romance*," in W. J. van Bekkum et al. (eds.), *Syriac Polemics* (Louvain 2007) 1–20; D. L. Schwartz, "Religious Violence and Eschatology in the Syriac Julian Romance," *JECS* 19 (2011) 565–587.

[37] Cf. G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* (Stuttgart 1965) 58–59, 311–313.

crown in the sky" seems odd in reference to a celestial body as clearly visible as the sun. Seen against Nimrod's astronomical interests it might rather refer to a constellation such as *Corona Borealis* or *Corona Australis*, both of which are mentioned in Ptolemy's *Almagest.*[38] In any case, the origin of Persian kingship here is tied to an—albeit ambiguous—biblical figure, which thus must have some connection with Zoroastrianism as well.

Indeed, Nimrod, together with Sisan, is introduced in *CT* as founder of the Persian religion (27.1–5):

> In the days of Nimrod the hero a fire appeared which had come from the earth. So Nimrod went down in order to see and to worship it. He installed priests there in order to minister to it continuously and throw incense into it. From that time onward the Persians began to worship fire until the present day. King Sisan found a well of water in Drugin, made a white horse and put it above it, and those taking a bath worshipped the horse. From then on the Persians began to worship this horse.

This short passage contains in condensed form a wealth of information about the origins of Zoroastrianism as seen by a Christian author in the late sixth century. To begin with, the very identity of Nimrod with Zoroaster implies his role as founder of the Persian religion, and this is the way Nimrod is presented in the earlier pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*:[39]

> Nimrod the first acceded to the throne of Babylon and built a city. From there, he migrated to Persia and taught them to worship fire.

[38] G. J. Toomer, *Ptolemy's Almagest* (London 1984) 323, 326, 347. The *Almagest* was the "standard textbook on astronomy" (Toomer 2) in late antiquity and was probably taught by Severus Sebokht in the school of Nisibis around 600 CE; cf. J. M. McMahon, "Severus Sebokht," *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Astronomers* (New York 2007) 1044–1045. The author of *CT*, obviously interested in astronomy (see below), might have known the constellations from there, if not by actual observation. On the Greek mythological background of *Corona Borealis* see T. Bilic, "Some Northern Constellations Used for Navigation in Antiquity," *VAMZ* 39 (2006) 15–58, here 21.

[39] 1.30.7 of the Syriac text; transl. F. S. Jones, *The Syriac Pseudo-Clementines* (Turnhout 2014) 89.

The fact that the fire discovered by Nimrod in *CT* "had come from the earth" might refer to the phenomenon of burning crude oil or natural gas, νάφθα, in northern Mesopotamia as described by Strabo (16.1.4).[40] Sisan, now presented as king alongside Nimrod, is credited with the introduction of horse-worship, which is recorded by Herodotus (7.40), Xenophon (*Cyr.* 8.3.11), and Strabo (11.13.7). Philostratus, an author closer to the time of *CT*, in his biography of Apollonius (1.31) has the Persian king sacrifice a white horse to the sun. Finally, the mention of "Drugin" might be a distorted reference to the Iranian province of *Adorbigan* (Azerbaijan), home to one of the major Zoroastrian sanctuaries near the ancient town of Ganzak southeast of Lake Urmia.[41]

*Astrology*

Immediately after this passage there follows the enigmatic meeting between Nimrod and an apocryhal son of Noah by the name of "Yonton," one of the central accounts in *CT*'s attempt to graft Persian culture upon Christian *Heilsgeschichte*. The author tells of Nimrod making a pilgrimage to the eastern country of Nod and the world-surrounding Okeanos, where he happens to meet Yonton and learns oracular wisdom (27.6–22):

> Nimrod went to Yuqdura in (the country of) Nod. When he reached the sea Otros [i.e. Okeanos] he found Yonton, the son of Noah, there. He went down and bathed in that sea. Then he drew near and worshipped Yonton. Yonton said to him: "You are a king and worship me?" Nimrod told him: "It is because of you that I came down here." He stayed with him for three years and

[40] Cf. Minov, *Syriac Christian Identity* 203–204.

[41] Cf. Ri, *Commentaire* 318–319; Schilling, *Die Anbetung* 83–94, 202 n.188. This fire-temple was known by the name of *Adhur Gushnasp* and in all likelihood is identical with the site of Takht-e Soleyman in north-western Iran. It was build around a spring pond and thus matches the rough description given in *CT*. On its significance as one of the major Sasasian sanctuaries from the fourth century until its destruction by Heraclius in 624 see K. I. Maksymiuk, "Destruction of the Ādur Gušnasp Temple in Ādurbādagān as a Revenge for Abduction of the Holy Cross from Jerusalem in the Context of the Letters of Heraclius," *Metamorphoses of History* 9 (2017) 109–125.

> Yonton taught Nimrod wisdom and the book of oracles. Then he told him: "Do not come back to me again." After he [Nimrod] had come up from the east he began to use this oracle (so that) many were amazed by it. When the priest Idashir, who was ministering to that fire which had come from the earth, saw that Nimrod was studying the celestial courses, he prayed to those demons which he had seen around the fire that they might teach him the wisdom of Nimrod. Since it is the demons' habit to corrupt by sin those near to them, the demon spoke to that priest: "Nobody can be priest and mage if he does not first mingle with his mother, daughter and sister." The priest Idashir did thus, and behold, from then on the priests and mages of the Persians began to marry their mothers. Behold, it was this mage Idashir who first began to use horoscopes, omens, augury, auspicious times and similar things, all the Chaldaean arts. Now all this is a doctrine of devilish deceit and those who practice it will receive punishment together with the devils on judgment day. But of the orthodox teachers no one rejects Nimrod's learning because Yonton taught it to him and this is also why they study it. The Persians call it "oracle," the Romans "astronomy." But that which the mages have is astrology, that is, sorcery and deceitful learning. There are those who say that there really are omens, portentous signs and auspicious times but they err.

The country of "Nod" mentioned in the first sentence appears in both Gen 4:14 and *CT* 5.31 as the place where Cain found refuge after killing Abel. Rabbinical sources apparently equated it with the "eastern mountains" of Gen 10:30, and this again is corroborated by the passage, which has Nimrod return "from the east" after his stay with Yonton, as well as by *CT* 24.20 which speaks about the "mountains of Nod" at the "entranceways to the east."[42] The name "Yonton" itself probably is a variant of Yoqtan, grandson of Arpachshad and descendant of Noah, who lived in the "eastern mountains" according to Gen 10:30 and seems to have been regarded as an astronomer/astrologer in

[42] Cf. Ri, *Commentaire* 350–352; A. Toepel, "Yonton Revisited: A Case Study in the Reception of Hellenistic Science within Early Judaism," *HThR* 99 (2006) 235–245, here 242–243.

early Jewish and rabbinic sources.[43] A probable background for Yonton/ Yoqtan's astronomical expertise might be found in the fact that in both Gen 10:25 and *Targ.Jon.* to Gen 10:26 Yoqtan is connected with the "division" or "measuring" of the earth, which in antiquity was intimately bound up with astronomy.[44] Insofar as land surveying did not exist in the Golden Age according to Lactantius (*Div.Inst.* 5.5.5–6, citing Verg. *G.* 1.126–127) and furthermore had been invented along with weights and measures by Cain according to Josephus (*AJ* 1.60–65), Yonton is an ambiguous figure who fits well into an age that saw the rise of idolatry and human sacrifice. His "wisdom"—presumably astronomical knowledge, which the author of *CT* carefully distinguishes from astrological and other divination—is laid down in a "book of oracles" which Nimrod-Zoroaster later uses for "studying the celestial courses." This motif is in line with the widespread tendency to attribute revelatory books to Zoroaster, and serves here to separate a legitimate (in the author's eyes) oracular tradition based upon astronomy from other kinds of divination (demon-inspired).[45] The latter are here ascribed to a priest Idashir, whose name bears a conspicuous resemblance to "Ardashir," founder of the Sasanid dynasty in 224, to whom demons reveal the necessity of close-kin marriage as was typical for the Zoroastrian clergy and Persian nobility and who thus becomes the actual founder of Zoroastrianism as it was encountered by Christians in the Sasanian empire.

One reason why it might have been important for a Christian author of the late sixth/early seventh century to detach Nimrod-Zoroaster from actual Persian religious practice can be seen in the fact that various sources have Zoroaster predict the birth of

[43] Cf. Toepel, *HThR* 99 (2006) 242–245.

[44] Cf. K. Geus and I. Tupikova, "Astronomy and Geography: Some Unexplored Connections in Ptolemy," *Antichistica* 13.2 (2017) 61–73, here 61–62.

[45] For instances of Ζωροάστρου λόγια see Bidez and Cumont, *Les mages* II 141, 207, 249.

Christ.[46] In *CT* such a tradition is markedly present in the description (45–46) of the magi's visit to Bethlehem.[47] According to this there obviously was a tradition of astronomical observation in the "land of Nimrod," i.e. Persia (45.7):

> According to their custom the kings of old and Chaldaean mages studied all the movements of the constellations.

Upon seeing a "star in the heavenly firmament which shone with a brighter light than all the other stars" (45.2) the magi return to the "mountains of Nod," i.e. Yonton's dwelling place, and take from there their gifts of gold, myrrh, and incense (45.12).[48] Remarkably enough, according to *CT* 45.19 all three magi bear the names of Sasanian rulers who actually or supposedly were friendly towards Christians: "Hormizdad" is reminiscent of Hormizd IV (579–590), while "Yazdgerd" seems to refer to Yazdgird I (399–420) and "Parwezdad" reminds the reader of Peroz I (459–484) as well as Khosrau II Aparvez (590–628).[49] The fact

[46] Bidez and Cumont, *Les mages* I 46–49. Because of their identification of Zoroaster with Bileam, several patristic authors (Origen, Jerome, Ambrose, Diodorus of Tarsus) trace the magi's knowledge to the Moabite prophet. The early Christian evidence is treated extensively in D. Hannah, "The Star of the Magi and the Prophecy of Balaam in Earliest Christianity, with special attention to the lost *Books of Balaam*," in P. Barthel et al. (eds.), *The Star of Bethlehem and the Magi* (Leiden 2015) 433–462. On Bileam in early Jewish literature see J. Zsengellér, "Changes in the Balaam Interpretation in the Hellenistic Jewish Literature," in H. Lichtenberger et al. (eds.), *Biblical Figures in Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature* (Berlin 2008) 487–506.

[47] Cf. on this passage the thorough commentary of S. Minov, "Dynamics of Christian Acculturation in the Sasanian Empire: Some Iranian Motifs in the *Cave of Treasures*," in G. Herman (ed.), *Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians – Religious Dynamics in a Sasanian Context* (Piscataway 2014) 149–201.

[48] These gifts had been brought by Adam from paradise and were later deposited in Noah's ark by his 'canonical' sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth (*CT* 16.14, 17.6). The author does not mention what happened to the gifts after the flood, but from this passage it becomes clear that they have been stored in the east, probably by Yonton who received them from Noah's other sons.

[49] Cf. Minov, in *Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians* 174–178. A similar identification of the New Testament magi with Iranian kings—albeit without names—is found in Kosmas Indikopleustes (2.76), who might have received

that they are priest-kings is further emphasised by the author having them wear priestly vestments on top of their royal robes (46.3–4). Although this does not seem to have corresponded to any actual practice, there is at least a literary tradition of Persian kings participating in cultic worship, in Philostratus (*VA* 1.29–31), Agathias (*Hist.* 2.26.3), and Georgios Synkellos (*Ecl.Chron.* I 677.17 Bonn), as well as in the Syriac *Romance of Julian*.[50]

*Conclusion*

All in all, from these brief accounts a rather coherent picture emerges: writing at the turn of the seventh century the author of *CT* encountered Hellenised oriental cults at Harran and Baalbek alongside Zoroastrianism as fire-worship with its main sanctuary near Ganzak in northwestern Iran. The religious practices are described ever so briefly but still with enough detail to make them recognisable to contemporaries as well as to later scholarship. By and large these descriptions fit with what is known of the last vestiges of paganism at the dawn of the Byzantine middle ages. They show an ongoing religious activity in regional centres

it from his teacher, the Nestorian Katholikos Mar Aba (540–552); cf. Schilling, *Anbetung* 162–165. The acts of the latter's synod in 544 (ed. Chabot 69–70 [text], 320 [transl.]) actually strive to integrate the mage-kings into Christian *Heilsgeschichte* while at the same time East Syrian historians are generally well disposed towards a number of Sasanian rulers such as Kavad, Shapur II, Yazdgird I, Khosrau I, Hormizd IV, and Khosrau II Aparvez. Cf. Minov 193 with n.184; C. Jullien, "Christianiser le pouvoir: images de rois sassanides dans la tradition syro-orientale," *OCP* 75 (2009) 119–131.

[50] Cf. Minov, in *Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians* 184. It interesting that Agathias and Synkellos, in the sixth century and the eighth, attach this tradition to Ardashir: "He was a devotee of the magian religion and an official celebrant of its mysteries" (J. D. Frendo, *Agathias. The Histories* [Berlin 1975] 60); ἦν δὲ μάγος (A. A. Mosshammer, *Georgii Syncelli Ecloga Chronographica* [Leipzig 1984] 440.16). In the Syriac *Romance of Julian* Shapur II is called "mage and god": Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans* 316–317. Kosmas Indikopleustes (2.76), much like *CT* but writing slightly earlier, projects this back into New Testament times: Persia is ruled by the magi who hold the second place after Rome because they worshipped Christ at his birth; cf. W. Wolska-Conus, *Cosmas Indicopleustès. Topographie Chrétienne* I (Paris 1968) 390–393.

such as those mentioned, which seems to imply that paganism in the eastern Mediterranean and northern Mesopotamia came to an end only with the advent of Islam if it did not persist under the guise of "Sabianism," as was the case in Harran.

Moreover, *CT*'s perception of Greco-Roman and Persian religion reveals an astrological underpinning with astrologer *extraordinaire* Nimrod at its centre. He indeed plays a special role as builder of Harran, instigator of sun-worship at Heliopolis, and fire-worship in Persia, recipient of reliable astronomical lore from Noah's apocryphal son Yonton, and founder of an oracular tradition predicting the birth of Christ and leading the magi to Bethlehem. In that sense there even seems to be in *CT* a positive appreciation of parts of late pagan religion as well, which focuses on the dual aspect of "astronomy" and reliable oracles as opposed to "astrology" and other kinds of divination.

This distinction in itself is a Platonic motif present in the Neoplatonic philosophers Simplicius and Olympiodorus (both writing in the sixth century) as well as Galen, Strabo, and Ptolemy.[51] Apparently following Plato, who does not mention the term ἀστρολογία, Simplicius in his commentary on the Aristotelian *Physics* (2.2) refers by ἀστρονομία to the scientific study of the stars in contrast to ἀστρολογία which is contaminated by ἀποτελεσματική, i.e. the study of astral influences upon human fate and the attempt to predict the future accordingly (IX 293 Diels). However, "scientific" in a Platonic context does not necessarily mean "empirical." Rather, the implication seems to be that "astronomy" is based upon the Pythagorean analogy between music and the celestial movements[52] and thus would be concerned with the harmonious revolutions of the stars and, presumably, the measurement of time. The author of *CT* might have been fascinated by this aspect of Platonic astronomy insofar as the book is concerned with a periodisation of salvation history

[51] Cf. W. Hübner, *Die Begriffe "Astrologie" und "Astronomie" in der Antike* (Stuttgart 1989) 10–15, 28–30.

[52] Hübner, *Begriffe* 12.

and attempts to establish a precise chronology of the events of Jesus' life, including the exact date of his birth (45.1).[53] In an intellectual environment that was used to having recourse to oracles in order to back up contested theories,[54] the use of "astronomy" as a token for ancient wisdom relating to the central events of Christianity would have been a strategy well chosen for an author dealing with pagan competitors in Iran and its western borderlands.

*May, 2019*

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[53] On the relation between chronography and astronomy see P. Varona, "Chronology and History in Byzantium," *GRBS* 58 (2018) 389–422.

[54] Cf. P. Athanassiadi, "Philosophers and Oracles: Shifts of Authority in Late Paganism," *Byzantion* 62 (1992) 45–62; C. Addey, "Oracles, Religious Practices and Philosophy in Late Neoplatonism," *Practical Philosophy* (2007) 31–35. The practice of referring to oracles was shared by Syrian Christians as well, as is evident from the collections edited by Sebastian Brock: "A Syriac Collection of Prophecies of the Pagan Philosophers," *OLP* 14 (1983) 203–246; "Some Syriac Excerpts from Greek Collections of Pagan Prophecies," *VigChr* 38 (1984) 77–90.